46: Liao S-5 (1943-1945)1947 AF16 Southwest China AF16

The Ko Lao Hui in Szechuan[1]

Liao T'ai-ch'u

5750 OF THE VARIOUS Chinese secret societies functioning in Szechuan province, the most prominent is the Ko Lao Hui (Brothers' Society). Its importance, especially in rural areas, is very great indeed. Involving many persons in all classes of society, it influences almost every aspect of daily life—social, political and economic. There are differing accounts of its origin. According to one theory, it was started as an offshoot of an older society. Another account attributes its creation to an underground movement opposed to the Manchu rulers of the Ch'ing dynasty (1644-1912). Still another connects it with late Ming (1368-1644) and early Ch'ing intellectuals who opposed the Manchus. In all likelihood, however, such a powerful society did not originate in response to a single stimulus. The factors which contributed decisively to the development of the Ko Lao Hui must have included loyalty to the Ming rulers (involving a glorification of self-sacrifice), difficulties of existence under the Ch'ing, and popular accounts of generous, brotherly acts performed by well-known figures in the past.

The Ko Lao Hui was probably founded in East China in the early Ch'ing period by persons of some education who were dissatisfied with Manchu rule. Its original aim was simple: opposition to the existing government. Members of different families and of different classes were welcomed and, as long as they supported this aim, were considered to be brothers. Equality and the eight virtues (filial piety, love for one's brothers and sisters, loyalty to one's superiors, faithfulness, courtesy, shame, probity, and righteous self-sacrifice), and especially the last virtue, *yi*[2] (which embraces both righteousness and generosity), were practiced religiously. At one period, characters representing these

[1] Part of the material on which these notes are based was collected during 1943-45 in the towns of Chung Yi and Chiu Li, in Chengtu district.

[2] *Yi* is highly honored in China. In the Ko Lao Hui, *yi* is regarded as symbolizing the unity of the society and the highest ideal of all members. *Ko Lao*, which means (older) brother, implies the idea of equality and *yi*.

6: Liao S-5 (1943-1945) 1947 AF16 Southwest China AF16

575 eight virtues were written inside members' gowns for purposes of identification.

As time passed and new members were admitted, the influence of the Ko Lao Hui spread and its activities grew more diversified, leading to an admixture of bad elements.[3] As a result of internal changes and oppression by the Ch'ing government (which knew of its existence and sought to liquidate it), the Ko Lao Hui moved gradually westward, following the course of the Yangtze River, and settled first in Hunan and Hupeh provinces and eventually in Szechuan. By the beginning of the present century, branches existed in most parts of Szechuan.

The Ko Lao Hui in Szechuan may be divided geographically into two main groups. The first comprises the branches on the Chengtu Plain, which includes 14 districts (*hsien*)—a total area of some 1,350 square miles within which are 1⅓ million acres of the richest agricultural land in China. This area is popularly regarded as the center of the Ko Lao Hui world:[4] it is estimated that 70 per cent of the male population belongs to the society. Members here are known for their interference in local (and, to some extent, provincial) political affairs, for their abandonment of most secret-society traditions, regulations and special terminology, and for their criminal activities.

The various branches in this area are in close touch with one another: they provide mutual assistance as need arises and cooperate in pursuing common policies even to the point of armed action. A branch is expected to harbor members of other branches who may have violated government laws and been forced to decamp from their own villages.[5] Since there is no over-all coordinating body above the branches, inter-branch cooperation is not always flawless. Nevertheless, information travels sufficiently speedily from branch to branch to enable them

[3] The admission, for example, of a large number of demobilized soldiers in Hunan province toward the end of the Ch'ing period greatly altered the original structure of the organization, extending and debasing its activities.

[4] In the small suburban community of Chung Yi, eight miles northwest of Chengtu city, 19 of the section heads (*pao chang*) are members of the society. In Chiu Li, another community three miles west of Chengtu, the village head (*hsiang chang*) himself is the leading member for the entire district of some 100 square miles.

[5] In December 1945 the branch in Chung Yi was taking care of a leader of a neighboring branch who, having disagreed with the government about a little matter of military conscription, had caused his subordinates to fire on certain government forces, killing a number of them. At Chung Yi he received royal treatment, enjoying good food and company as well as the respect of the local members.

6: Liao S-5 (1943-1945)1947 AF16 Southwest China AF16

to function as though they were under a single command. Inter-branch relations are, however, becoming steadily less close; a program involving common action in an area larger than a district is rare nowadays. 575

The second main group of the Ko Lao Hui in Szechuan, less highly organized than the first, is situated along the Yangtze River. Limitations of space prevent consideration of this group in these notes.

EXACTLY WHEN Ko Lao Hui activities extended all over the Chengtu Plain is not known, but it is thought to have been some time in the late Ch'ing period. Now every district supports at least one branch of the society. Each branch, considered as a separate administrative unit, has its own (geographical) sphere of influence; members are not supposed to engage in society activities outside of its boundaries.

The highest post in a branch is that of director (*to pa tze*, literally "helmsman"). Not all directors are equally popular or prominent or of equal influence in society affairs. Certain directors owe their prominence to advanced age, exemplary moral conduct, or some other important attribute. A few of the most influential are active in public affairs and can make or break district, and even provincial, administration. The post of director is not strictly elective, but one may become director only with the approval of other members of one's branch.

Although all members are considered to be brothers of one family, eight or nine different ranks exist in each branch. (Minor differences in ranking are found among different branches.) Ranks are conferred originally by the director at the annual initiation ceremony. The rank or degree conferred depends on the recipient's general past experience, his education and his financial standing. But the mere attainment of high rank does not carry with it possession of any particular post.

Below the director are several officers, each assigned a particular function. For example, the vice-director is supposed to be a saintly figure who can settle disagreements between members by means of persuasion and good will rather than by invoking the "law". There are also two controllers or managers, one in charge of business within the branch and the other charged with inter-branch affairs. Except in administrative matters of prime importance, about which they must consult the director, these two officials run the branch: they look after its accounts and properties, arbitrate disagreements, keep records, organize the two grand annual assemblies, receive guests and visitors, etc.

6: Liao S-5 (1943-1945) 1947 AF16 Southwest China AF16

575 Inter-branch affairs may include such activities as the exchange of important information concerning changes in executive officers, deaths of members, expulsion of undesirables, attitudes toward specific government regulations (such as the conscription plan in 1944), invitations to attend functions, proposals for settling conflicts between branches or their members. Not long ago a member of one branch was for some reason severely beaten up by members of another. After prolonged negotiations, the latter branch gave an elaborate 16-table feast to express its apologies and regret, and the incident was thus amicably concluded.

Refugees[6] from other branches are received by the controller. On arriving, the refugee enters a convenient tea house, seats himself at a table on which he places a piece of pork, and orders a cup of tea or hot water. The keeper of the tea house, who is familiar with this ceremony, sends at once for the controller of the local branch. The latter appears speedily and puts a series of questions to the refugee who must reply in appropriate, extremely technical terms. If the refugee proves to be an offender against government (i.e., not against Ko Lao Hui) laws, the controller will offer him shelter, or sufficient funds, clothes and the like to enable him to reach another destination of his choice.

According to the formal constitution of the society, each branch has several officers in addition to those already mentioned. These include an official in charge of worship, a keeper of the seal, a protocol officer, a preparer of the budget, a supervisor of social affairs, a welfare officer for new members, a supervisor of punishments, an executioner, a guard, a watchman, ushers, etc. In reality, however, besides the director, vice-director and the two controllers, there are only one or two members who help in running the branch. Details of organization have been greatly simplified to accord with the present social environment of the Ko Lao Hui. Thus, the director may call on any other member to do errands for him. Except during the two grand meetings each year (when a temple or tea house is commandeered), society administration is carried on in the home of the director or of the controller concerned: an office in the modern sense does not exist. Most of the leading members spend their spare time in the tea houses gossiping with one another. If one does not know their habits, these men are hard to find.

[6] Usually these are men who, having violated some important government law, have thought it advisable to leave home for a while.

6: Liao S-5 (1943-1945)1947 AF16 Southwest China AF16

575

In addition to occasional executive conferences called to consider urgent matters and attended by a few important members, each branch holds two formal meetings every year. All members are expected to attend.

ONE OF THESE assemblies, held on the thirteenth day of the fifth moon, is devoted to ceremonies involving admission of new members, promotion of old members, punishment of evil-doers, and, where executives have recently died, election of successors. The initiation ceremony is spectacular and takes place in a temple or tea house containing an altar decorated with portraits, statues or spirit tablets of Kuang Yün Chang, reputed to have been a founder of the Ko Lao Hui. Numerous lighted candles stand on the altar next to the sacrifices (usually meat, chicken and fruit); couplets celebrating the ideals of loyalty and sacrifice for a cause (*yi*) cover the walls on both sides of the altar.

Entering the hall, each candidate kowtows repeatedly before the altar to pay his respects to Kuang Yün Chang. Next he is catechized briefly by a controller. After having sworn to observe all the rules of the society and to treat his fellow-members like brothers, he turns and kowtows to the director, who occupies a prominent seat. The director, hiding his face behind a fan (perhaps to conceal his embarrassment at such an honor), announces the rank of the candidate, whereupon the latter expresses repeated thanks for the rank that has just been bestowed upon him. He then turns to other important members, bowing or kowtowing and indicating his joy. The candidate directs his final bows to his two sponsors and two guarantors.[7] Finally his name is entered on the record, and he is then accepted as a new member. The occasion ordinarily ends with mutual congratulations, the explosion of firecrackers, and a big feast given by the society or by a rich newcomer.

As a rule the new member receives a certificate of membership. This may contain, on the first page, the name and seal of the branch; on the second, a copy of Sun Yat-sen's will, surmounted by his portrait; on the third, a few lines of Chiang Kai-shek's teachings and his portrait; on the fourth, the society motto and the eight virtues; on the fifth, sig-

[7] A candidate must have four such old members to support his application for admission. In addition he has to pay an initiation fee, which in 1945 was approximately CNC$2,000.

6:Liao S-5 (1943-1945)1947 AF16 Southwest China AF16

575 natures of the branch officials, followed by the name and rank of the recipient; and on the sixth page, the date of issuance.[8]

The second function of the "fifth-moon" assembly is promotion of members in rank. Promotions are granted most often in recognition of heroic or otherwise admirable behavior toward the community or the director, financial contributions to the society, assistance rendered to fellow members, and the like. Members in the upper ranks are much more apt to receive promotions than those of lower degree, who must remain back-benchers indefinitely. Having once gained the position of director, a man relinquishes the post only on his death. Incidentally, the death of a man of such importance as a director is mourned by the entire community, non-members as well as members. The mourning period lasts seven weeks.[9]

575 681 The third function of the "fifth-moon" meeting has to do with punishments of members. The Ko Lao Hui has an extensive code of regulations and disciplines, but the process of change which has affected other aspects of the society has also made this code more or less obsolete. The myriad regulations that were strictly enforced at one stage in the history of the Ko Lao Hui were designed to promote brotherhood, the observance of loyalty and *yi,* filial piety, a proper attitude toward women, patriotism, respect for the aged, and contempt for money. Nowadays there is a marked variation among different branches in the strictness with which rules are observed and infractions punished; the degree depends upon the ethical standards observed by the members in each branch. A man who has violated a regulation of the society is first reproved by the director of his branch or by his intimates. Serious crimes are dealt with at once through a meeting of a few prominent members without waiting for a grand assembly. In consequence, the cases considered at the grand assembly are usually only minor misdemeanors. These are discussed briefly before the director announces the punishment to be applied to each case.

Punishments are divided into several grades: death (by ignominious

[8] This list illustrates the extent to which Ko Lao Hui ritual has accommodated itself to present-day fashions.

[9] After the death of a director in Chung Yi, a large building in the market center was set aside for mourning activities, while numberless couplets, expressing sorrow at the loss of a great leader, and pieces of white silk and sacrifices in the form of goods and money decorated the main street. Mourners came from great distances. Even Sun Yat-sen's death had not created such a stir.

6: Liao S-5 (1943-1945)1947 AF16 Southwest China AF16

slow dismemberment, burial alive or shooting), beating with a rod, beating with a ruler, and public degradation (causing the culprit to kneel on a special bench in public with a red tape on his back describing his crime). Except for the death penalty, punishments are meted out with the intention of correcting rather than hurting members. No one likes to see a fellow-member punished. In fact, although punishments exist in name, in reality most miscreants receive only a warning or reproof. If a case is extremely serious, the criminal is "thrown away"—that is, shot. The society prefers to execute its own members instead of delivering them to the government, for the latter course implies an insult to the whole society. Expulsion from the branch may be substituted for the death penalty; in such an event, the criminal will not be taken in by any other branch.

The second grand assembly of the year, held on the thirtieth day of the twelfth moon, is a time of celebration and house-cleaning, with some gambling and opium-smoking on the side. Neither of these latter activities is regarded as criminal by the society; they bring in vast sums of money to the society exchequer. Since this assembly occurs at (Chinese) New Year, which is celebrated for at least two weeks, members have a grand opportunity for social intercourse. During this meeting there is usually discussion of general society policy and of financial reports, funds are collected from members according to their financial status, elections are held to fill vacant positions, and reports on recent important events are delivered. Often, too, promotions and demotions are announced; this is done particularly in the case of a branch that has more "good" than "bad" members. Steps taken to clear the branch of bad elements are announced, warnings are given to undesirables, and dates are set for the expulsion of major criminals. Every one sits down together to share the last meal of the year, thus symbolizing the unity and brotherhood which bind the members.

THERE ARE several reasons for the spread of the Ko Lao Hui in Szechuan, and for the extension of its activities into so many aspects of present-day society. For one thing, in a country such as China, where law enforcement does not extend to the small hamlets or individual farms, persons sharing similar interests are inclined to band together to protect those interests even though by doing so they may bring disaster upon others. The majority of members possessing real power in the Ko

6:Liao S-5 (1943-1945)1947 AF16 Southwest China AF16

575 Lao Hui of the Chengtu Plain belong to the middle class. Each owns between five and eight acres of land, and derives his income directly or indirectly from the land on which he lives; in addition, he may own a store or two in the market center. These people regard the society as a form of social insurance which will guard the well-being of their families, benefit their business activities, and protect their properties from intrusion, alienation or undue taxation. Initially the Ko Lao Hui arose in response to ultra-conservative needs, for it maintains the social order, upholds accepted standards of behavior, and affords its members protection in case of disaster.[10] Such security is desired most in an area where lawlessness prevails and where provision for Western types of insurance—accident, personal or social—is lacking. The Ko Lao Hui is in fact a mutual assistance association, a means of safeguarding one's property and security through the protection of one's neighbors' property and security.

When a large number of middle-class people band together, they often gain a controlling voice in community affairs; whoever wishes to remain in the community must work either with or against them. As a result, members of the upper class are apt to cooperate with them; sometimes, indeed, because of their superior knowledge of administration, these upper-class representatives may assume the leadership in a society branch. Occasionally, well-educated and social-minded persons must participate in the activities of the society if they wish to remain and work in a community. Lower-class persons, too, discovering that they must depend on the society for a living, enter its lower ranks. The practice of *yi* offers the lower classes a form of insurance against personal misfortune. If a lower-class member falls sick or dies, his family will be looked after. In certain areas, tenants who are members of the Ko Lao Hui cannot be evicted no matter how often ownership of the land may change. If one obeys orders from above, one need have no fear of being unemployed; in the event that such orders contravene government laws, one can depend on being housed and fed and cared for in general while being sought by the government. If a high-ranking member commits a crime and is (for a wonder) energetically pursued by the

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[10] In Chengtu in 1942 the author met a Ko Lao Hui member who, though he had lost all of his limbs and thus his earning power, was nevertheless enjoying the company of four young concubines in a large and well-appointed house. It transpired that his comfortable situation was due entirely to the assumption of his fellow-members that, since he had been a good brother in the society before his misfortune, he now merited the very best treatment.

6: Liao S-5 (1943-1945)1947 AF16 Southwest China AF16

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government, the society will provide and pay for a substitute to confess to the crime and to suffer the consequences in his stead.

Another reason for the continued existence of the Ko Lao Hui in Szechuan is the confusion and disorder which have prevailed there in recent years. During the war the central government, which had established its capital in Szechuan and was anxious to avoid unnecessary unrest, encouraged the provincial government in its lax administration. The attitude of compromise adopted toward most problems fostered the development of localism and gave the Ko Lao Hui an opportunity to increase the scope and variety of its activities to a point where it interfered with many aspects of government administration. In any case, government in Szechuan has been so corrupt for so long that the people have no confidence in it.[11] The war years simply aggravated popular dissatisfaction with and distrust of the government, so that any new official measure is received with suspicion. The people have become accustomed to managing their affairs and settling their disagreements by extra-governmental means. It is natural for them to turn to the local Ko Lao Hui branch director, who represents, in theory at least, the virtues of brotherhood, filial piety and proper behavior toward women. Thus the director has become not only the possessor of power but a symbol of righteousness as well. Disagreements between non-members of the society, as well as between members, are now commonly referred to him for settlement.

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The Ko Lao Hui is not a political party, nor does it entertain any pretensions regarding the shaping of national policy—so long as the interests of its middle-class founders are not endangered. Thus far Ko Lao Hui political activities have remained defensive. Individual members may occupy important government posts, but the society as a whole remains aloof from Kuomintang party politics. The society has voiced sharp criticism of Communism, which it regards as inimical to middle-class interests. While adopting a *laissez-faire* attitude toward politics,

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[11] The demobilization, in the closing years of the Sino-Japanese war, of many Szechuanese troops without adequate provision for their reemployment greatly swelled the number of undesirable members of the society, and in turn made things more difficult for the government. The possession by society members of an extraordinarily large number of small arms aggravates the situation. In the course of his investigation of two districts near Chengtu, the author learned that nearly every member of the Ko Lao Hui in those localities owned a pistol or a rifle. In Chengtu district one out of every two members possessed such arms without a license. Leaders not infrequently had late-model machine guns.

6: Liao S-5 (1943-1945) 1947 AF16 Southwest China AF16

575 the Ko Lao Hui keeps the closest watch over government policy, especially where it considers its own interests to be concerned.

662 An illustration of how the Ko Lao Hui functions in this respect may be seen in the typical case of Huang Jun Chin, branch director in the village of Yuan T'ung. To the people who live in it, Yuan T'ung seems less a village than a country of which Huang is king. He owns some 400 acres of land and several thousand side arms which are borne by 3,000 men (all society members) directly under his command. In the county seat he and some of his men occupy a huge mansion fortified with machine-gun emplacements. Several close relatives hold important positions in the municipal and provincial governments. Although they are paid by the county government, two platoons of guards and policemen are armed with Huang's guns and are answerable to him alone. His men are also in the magistrate's office; in fact, the magistrate is no more than a figurehead whose function it is to transmit government orders to Huang and to await his instructions. The county administration takes no action without Huang's prior consent. He not only presides over the county council, but appoints all of its other members. Huang's case is typical of the power of the society which, though essentially non-political, frequently interferes with, and occasionally assumes direct control of, county government.[12]

575 Each branch of the society derives its regular income from a number of sources, of which opium dens are the most important. In one 548 locality there are ten such dens, each run by a different high-ranking member. Each must contribute a definite sum to the branch, as must the semi-secret gambling houses and brothels. Illegal transactions in prohibited goods such as arms, gasoline and other vital war materials are effected under the supervision and protection of the society, which collects a fee on each transaction. Another source of income is the "mar- 575 ket" where, though no goods are handled, such commodities as rape 437 seed, rice and the like are bought and sold in wholesale quantities; since no goods are in evidence, the government agent, if he is present, sees nothing on which to levy a tax, but the society, keeping a com-

[12] Of course, the society manifests its power in other ways. For example, local coal mines and salt works cannot move their products to market until they have paid the society large sums on each shipment. Before making tours of inspection in the districts of the Chengtu Plain, government officials are expected to notify, and to secure the protection of, Ko Lao Hui officials. This procedure is necessary because bandits, county guards and administrators are usually all members of the society.

6: Liao S-5 (1943-1945) 1947 AF16 Southwest China AF16

plete record of transactions, collects a tax in place of the government.[13] In addition, the Ko Lao Hui controls many inland communications in the sense that it operates chains of control points similar to customs houses at which merchants and other travelers are stopped for contributions.

Other, irregular sources of income are more difficult to assess. Most big stores within the territory of a branch must present gifts, in cash or in kind, either to the director or to the branch, several times each year. The amount of the contribution depends on the size of the store. Special collections occur frequently and may affect not only businessmen but also landowners, who pay a certain amount on each acre. Although stealing, robbery and kidnapping are not openly encouraged by most branches, members who have committed such crimes usually go to their director and present the branch with a large portion of their gains in return for its protection. (One can usually regain a "lost" article if one knows the right person in the branch to turn to.) Some leaders of the Ko Lao Hui capitalize on the power of the society for private and selfish ends at the expense of non-members, or even of other members, but a portion of their profits are invariably devoted to the needs of the society.[14]

ONE OF THE most interesting aspects of the Ko Lao Hui in Szechuan concerns the changes in its forms and activities which have taken place in recent years. Shifts in the needs and interests of communities in which the Ko Lao Hui exists have brought about changes in the motivation and spirit of the society. For example, patriotism—specifically, opposition to the Ch'ing rulers—is thought to have been the main motive for the original establishment of the Ko Lao Hui. But since the disappearance of the Ch'ings as rulers and of the Manchus as a

[13] At one such "market" in 1945 the society branch collected CNC$200 on each *tan* (133 pounds) of rice sold. On an average day 300 *tan* might change hands, resulting in a rake-off, on rice sales alone, of some CNC$60,000. There are eight or nine "market" days each month.

[14] An illustration of how the society looks after its own was afforded by an incident which recently occurred one morning six miles outside of Chengtu. Three cotton dealers, carrying a huge sum of money, were set upon by three highwaymen (Ko Lao Hui members acting on instructions from one of their leaders). A company of road guards, chancing to come upon the scene just after the robbers had secured their loot, started a gun fight which lasted several hours and resulted in the wounding of several guards and the death of two guards and two of the robbers. The surviving robber escaped with the money, all of which was later set aside for the future welfare of the families of the two dead members.

6: Liao S-5 (1943•1945)1947 AF16 Southwest China AF16

575 people apart, this source of inspiration has likewise vanished. Ideals of filial piety and of veneration for older persons, though still observed, have lost much of their former appeal as a result of the war and the infiltration of Western thought. On the other hand, *yi* and brotherhood, which are at the core of all Ko Lao Hui activities—particularly those involving social insurance and security—have not only remained cardinal principles of the society but are being observed with greater zeal than ever, largely because the security of the people is increasingly threatened by the present system of government.

575 A prominent characteristic of any secret society is the use of a special terminology by its members. For various reasons—to distinguish members from non-members, to permit members to outwit government authorities, etc.—a secret society, especially in the early stages of development, finds it convenient to designate terms of its own making which differ sufficiently from common usage to enable members to communicate with one another without being understood by the uninitiate. At present, however, the Ko Lao Hui has come so far into the open that nearly everyone knows of its existence and may join it if he so desires. Since most of its activities are common knowledge, there is no longer a need for a secret language with which to conceal them. Instead, a number of new terms have been introduced into Ko Lao Hui parlance, indicating a certain adaptation to changing conditions of society.

575 The progressive relaxation of entrance requirements to a point where almost anyone may join has made for marked local dissimilarities. The 565 wholesale entrance into the Ko Lao Hui of local warlords, retired politicians, corrupt government officials and demobilized soldiers, few of whom are interested primarily in the social aims of the society, is causing the society to engage in an increasing number of undesirable activities while at the same time encouraging the tendency toward separatism among the branches. To a Ko Lao Hui member of the old school, such a trend represents degeneration which must result ultimately in complete separation and dissolution.

575 On the other hand, it is clear that the Ko Lao Hui will retain its power until something can be found to replace it. The government, 668 though well aware of the growing power and influence of the society, has done little to combat it beyond occasionally voicing expressions of alarm. Government officials have been forbidden to join the society, and

6: Liao S-5 (1943-1945)1947 AF16 Southwest China AF16

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students in government schools have been threatened with expulsion if they become members. But one may question the efficacy of a policy which ignores a manifestation of this kind while permitting it to grow stronger. Surely, it would be better to investigate the Ko Lao Hui—to discover why it exists, how it operates and what are its effects—and then to seek means of reforming it, of converting it into an effective force for improving the welfare of the people. For the *basic* principles of the Ko Lao Hui are not anti-social. And if the political situation in the province remains chaotic; if corruption in government continues; if unemployment, especially of demobilized soldiers, is not combated; if popular education remains completely inadequate; and if some sort of social insurance is not provided in the present period of rehabilitation; then, the people will certainly continue to look to the Ko Lao Hui for protection and for a livelihood.

Chengtu, Szechuan, 1946